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ABSTRACT

The school of communication at Northern Arizona University identified four areas--survey, written, oral, and theory--to be included in the core curriculum for all communication majors. As a follow-up to the deliberation by the school's curriculum committee, a study was undertaken to determine if such central curricula could be found in similar schools of communication. Directors, deans, chairs or curriculum coordinators at 40 institutions were asked to respond to a questionnaire and to include any information, brochures or other details that would describe the intent and purpose of their curricula. The results indicated that schools seem to be moving toward a common process of communication instruction. The vast majority of institutions specifically designated particular core courses. Based upon the data gathered, it appeared that most core courses center around four conceptual or applied areas that are basic to all communication/mass communication fields: writing skills, communication survey or history, communication theory (blended with theory and research), and communication law and ethics. (HOD)

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CURRICULAR COMMONALITIES

AMONG SELECTED SCHOOLS OF COMMUNICATION

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by

Ray Newton and Joseph C. Walters

> No one can function effectively without a sophisticated appreciation and understanding of our society's communication system and the way in which it works...Courses like...communication in society are more--much more--than just part of one's liberal eduction. They're indispensible for anything that calls itself an education of any kind.1

During the past few years, both the professional and the academic communities have had on-going discussions regarding the fundamentals of basic education in our school systems. At present, the move seems to be toward the more "traditional" approach of teaching those common subjects which our forefathers thought necessary to be "well educated." The fundamentals of reading, writing and arithmetic should be part of every youngster's education. Many have argued or thought about and discussed what should be included as common material in the curriculum, whether in grades K through 12 or in our own particular college discipline. The traditional subjects in English (reading and writing), mathematics (arithmetic), science, social studies and humanities have been agreed upon in some form or

another as common subject areas in grade school, high school and college. Most colleges also subscribe to the traditional liberal studies block of courses.

In higher education, most academicians within a given discipline also have agreed upon a set of fundamental principles, areas or courses that students majoring in that discipline should understand or master. The goal of this "common" instruction is to maximize the efficiency with which all students achieve specified objectives. The selection of what should be included in the common instruction is usually based on what the students know before beginning the common instruction and what the students should be able to do in latter course work.

Northern Arizona University recently completed the process of selecting a group of courses considered fundamental to the School of Communication created in the summer of 1985. These courses will be taken by all majors within the school, which includes the departments of journalism, speech communication and telecommunication. Early in the curriculum revision process, the School of Communication Curriculum Committee identified four areas--survey, written, oral and theory--to be included in the central curriculum or core for all students majoring in the school.

One reason for a core curriculum is that a central body of knowledge made up of concepts and principles, represented

by a technical terminology, can be applied in the various settings of the several departments of the school. The core offers students and faculty better understanding of what they are doing and why in more advanced, particular and parochial courses. In considering the four core areas, the curriculum committee affirmed that each course should be broad-form in nature--that is, communication as a genre be at the heart of each course.

As a follow-up to the deliberation by the curriculum committee, this study was undertaken to determine if like central curricula are found in similar organizational structures, e.g., departments or schools of communication.

Curricular perspectives

The movement for reform in undergraduate curricula has permeated the entirety of higher education. Prompted by the damning A Nation at Risk report about public education issued three years ago, and fueled by scores of regional and state self-studies, the vehicles of curricular analysis and self-study are in motion throughout the country.

Communication and mass communication are not exempt from such inspection and criticism. (NOTE: For purposes of this study, the above are considered to be the non-English department areas such as journalism, speech, telecommunication, public relations, advertising, visual communication and the like. They have at their center

written, oral, and theoretical visual components which are more typically directed at an audience different from that of traditional English pursuits).

Already, a report, Planning for Curricular Change, notes that some communication and mass communication programs are perhaps not as responsive to the challenge of reform as they might be.[2] Still other studies and reports indicate that undergraduate curricular reform is needed and necessary.[3] J. Robert Craig addressed that issue when he wrote:

> ...communication educators will need to draw upon research detailing the impact the media have already had in shaping the way we interact with one another, raise our young, perform routine tasks such as shopping and banking and choose our government leaders.[4]

Craig emphasizes that communication programs need to take the lead in evaluating and redirecting their efforts to meet current education trends.[5]

This is not to say that communication and mass communication educators-leaders are unaware of the need for a critical look at curricular reform. The complete issue of Journalism Educator, Autumn 1985, was devoted to the theme "Journalism and Mass Communication Education for the 21st Century."[6] Virtually every article focused upon the need to expand the content of communication courses, to incorporate more philosophical and theoretical bases into communication programs, and to diminish some of the "skills" courses which

tend to become repetitive and mundane. As Dwight Teeter, currently the president of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication put it, some of the struggle is over the issue of communication/mass communication education or training--the difference between educating students who have strong backgrounds in what traditionally have been called the Letters and Science, and training students for skill-oriented positions which can be learned on the job.[7]

That same idea was stated a different way when Achal Mehra wrote the following:

> Professional programs, by and large, have failed to be infused with critical thought. They are bent upon instead sprucing up their graduates for the marketplace. This may well satisfy a temporary want, but it can be pernicious. Human history, after all, is a history of revolutionary ideas. It is these ideas that may not be forthcoming from an army of technicians.[8]

It seems apparent that communication curricula are under scrutiny--not just from external agents but also from within. Robert O. Blanchard and William G. Christ, both from the Sid. W. Richardson Communications Center, Trinity University, San Antonio, echo this attitude when they comment about the ongoing criticism of undergraduate education:

> It is sure to ignite a public debate, and perhaps an explosion including all or a combination of the following:
>
> --a coalition of consumers, parents and students, under the strain of rising costs and declining government support, demanding improvements in undergraduate education;

> --corporations and businesses, expanding their own training programs and calling on higher education to concentrate on the 'basics' because they have become weary of overtrained and undereducated graduates who expect high-paying jobs out of college;
>
> --boards of trustees and administrators, smarting from charges they have delegated their powers and responsibilities of self-serving faculty, taking a more active role in curriculum decisions.9

None of the above is new. Almost 20 years ago, Richard Budd and Malcolm MacLean presented a paper to the National Conference on Communication Education at Wingspread. Part of that paper said the following:

> We spend too much time in trying to teach our undergraduates mechanical matters such as spelling and style that might better be handled by self-instructional approaches. We don't have them read or write, especially read, nearly enough. We tend to limit their writing to the amount we can correct, as though they could learn nothing from writing that is not corrected by a teacher.
>
> Though we pay lip service to the need for liberalizing influences, we often seem to act as though the most important purpose of a student's journalism education is to please the boss on his or her first job. Our students learn today's formulas rather than the communication theories that might bridge them into the future. And generally we have tacked on such things as international communication and cross-cultural comparative courses rather than making them see things from different points of view, the sense of commonalities and differences of ourselves with other people, an integral part of the learning of budding journalists. On ethics and responsibility, we have typically preached sermons or had our students read the sermons of others.
>
> We have sent our students to other departments--very much encouraged by our accrediting system--to get smatterings of history,

> literature, psychology, economics and political science, assuming that these brief immersions would prepare them well for interpreting the world. In this, we have been caught up in what we consider an education-wide problem: too much concern for fact storage, too little for learning processes of learning, to little for contemplating purposes, too little for basic philosophical matters, too little for exercising our precious intellects.10

Some 19 years later, Budd repeats the same litany.

> We have a crying need for curricular reform, for reshaping programs and philosophies, but we will not succeed by re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. When we talk about structual change, we must talk about deep structure, and not about the sort of superficial faceliftings and tack-on strategies that have distinguished our past. New course titles and reworked descriptions with new buzz words may make exciting catalog copy, but they do not necessarily make programs good ones or good ones better. New paradigms do not simply appear, they emerge as the result of seeing the world in a different light, by looking to the future and not over our shoulders.11

Seeing the academic world in a new light is perhaps what is occurring in the often confused curriculum called communication/mass communication. But perhaps those fields referred to earlier--journalism, speech, public relations, telecommunications and the like--are finding some common ground in this era of redirected thinking about programmatic direction. Certainly this is what Churchill L. Roberts addressed when he comments:

> ...most tracks or programs of study require courses in both areas [speech and mass communication]. They do so because, for the most part, certain speech communication skills--most notably the ability to speak

> effectively--and certain mass communication skills--such as the ability to produce messages for the mass media--go hand in hand in providing first rate education in communication.
>
> With its curriculum in order, the department can now take full advantage of the fact that it has one foot in the humanities, one in the social sciences, and its outstretched to the business world--an enviable position as higher education faces the problems of the mid-1980s.12

Thus it is that colleges and universities have initiated new programs and new systems for integrating what previously might have been considered diverse curricula. But are there cores--commonalities--among institutions of higher education? Are there programs which, in fact, are similar, even though no national mandate has been suggested? Are faculties from previously parochial areas working together to initiate innovative and articulated programs, especially in communication/mass communication?

Survey methodology

The sample for data collection was determined through reviewing the institutions listed in the 1985 Journalism Directory published by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. The investigators selected those institutions which had the academic title of Department of or School of Communication or some similar identification which would indicate that more than one academic discipline or concentration was offered through the unit. If an institution listed in the directory was named

"Department of Journalism" or "Department of Broadcasting", or a similar designation, that institution was not included in the sample. Hence, some institutions which do in fact have a program involving multidisciplinary offerings were eliminated from this study. It would require closer scrutiny of specific catalogs and curricular offerings to develop a genuinely comprehensive sample.

Once the institutions were selected, the director, dean, chair or curriculum coordinator was contacted via direct mail. These persons were asked to respond to a questionnaire and to include any information, brochures or other details which would amplify the intent and purpose of their curriculum.

The fundamental issue being studied was "Does your institution/department/academic division requres a 'core'--common courses--of all students who enroll as majors, no matter what the sequence or concentration?"

The secondary questions were those of what specific courses were being offered or required and in what numbers.

A tertiary question was that of the philosophy underlying the requirement of core courses within a department or school of communication curriculum.

Survey results

Of the 40 institutions contacted in 27 states which seemed to have programs which might be identified as departments or schools of communication and which seemed to be configured in a similar manner to the recently formed School of Communication at Northern Arizona University, 31 responded to the questionnaire. These schools represented 21 of the 27 states.

Tabulated responses to the questions are summarized below.

1. Does your program require that all students who enroll as majors take a "core" of common courses within the broad disciplines of communication/mass communication? (N=31)

Yes 25 (80.6%) No 3 (9.6%) With Limitations 3 (9.6%)

2. If yes to question 1, how many courses are required for the core? (N=31)

No. of Course	Responses	Percent
0	3	9.6%
1	1	3.2%
2	2	6.4%
3	6	19.4%
4	9	29.0%
5	3	9.6%
6 or more	7	22.6%

3. How many core courses are required before a student can officially declare a major? (N=29; two no responses)

Core courses	Responses
0	15
1	4
2	5
3	4
4	1
5	0
6 or more	0

4. Are the core courses specifically designated, or may a student elect from among several courses offered? (N=31)

Specifically designated	26	83.8%
Elected	5	16.2%

5. If the core courses are specifically designated, please list them (or enclose program information which answers the question). (N=31)

(NOTE: The investigators sometimes has to interpret course titles/names or subject fields, based upon the course prefixs or course descriptions or, in some cases, assumed similarities. The below course fields are intended to be generic).

Course	Responses
Communication/media writing	20
Introduction to communication (sometimes mass communication)	20
Communication law and ethics	19
Theory of communication	15
Communication research	10

Speech	8
Communication history	8
Communication effects	8
Interpersonal communication	6
Persuasion	6
Professional seminar	4
Visual communication (sometimes photography)	3
Television	2
Internship	2
Advertising	2
Public relations	2
Communication technology	2
Organizational communication	1
Semantics	1
Acting	1
Design	1
Aesthetics	1
International communication	1
Editing	1

6. From what departments/disciplines are core courses taken? (Please check those which are appropriate). (N=27)

Department/Discipline	Responses
Journalism	20
Communication/mass communication	17
Speech	11
Television	6
Public relations	5
Photography	3
Radio	3
Advertising	3
Magazine writing	2
Law	2

Conclusions and recommendations

Those schools surveyed seem to be moving toward or have already moved toward a common process--fundamentals--of communication instruction. This tendency is demonstrated by the overwhelming number--80.6 percent--which have common cores.

It also seems that the number of core courses required is consistent among institutions which have core requirements.

However, no pattern emerges with respect to the number of schools which require undergraduate students to complete core courses before declaring a formal major.

The vast majority of institutions--83.8 percent--do specifically designate particular core courses. Further, the majority of core courses seem to be identified as common to the communication/mass communication process. It seems obvious that writing is definitely a core course, just as introduction to communication is considered necessary. Immediately behind writing and introductory communication classes is communication law and ethics.

About half the institutions require a theory of communication course, while only one-third require communication research.

The speech, communication history and communication effects courses are required by slightly less than one-third the respondents.

It must be noted that the course titles did not necessarily reveal the offering department. For instance, it is possible--and probable--that course Introduction to Communication/Mass Communication might have been offered through any of the traditional departments--journalism, speech and/or telecommunication. Or it may be that a simple "Communication" or "Mass Communication" prefix was attached to some of the courses considered core.

What is also of interest is that core courses included 24 course fields (see responses, question 5). However, the preponderant number of core courses--the first five noted in the table--were designated broadly as "communication/mass communication," and not some more discipline-specific listing.

Equally interesting is that while 10 departments were cited as "homes" for the core courses, journalism, speech and communication/mass communication were by far the most frequently cited departments. (See responses, question 6).

Based upon the data gathered and the written comments or program descriptions which accompanied the responses to the survey, it would seem that most programs which require a central core of courses are building that core around four conceptual or applied areas which are basic to all communication/mass communication fields: writing skills, communication survey or history, communication theory

(blended with theory and research), and communication law and ethics. Closely allied to the above would be core courses in oral communication.

What remains to be done is close analysis of the precise content of what seems to be central among the required core courses. This analysis can be accomplished by examination of catalog copy or course outlines from the appropriate institutions.

In sum, it appears that considerable consistency exists among those departments or schools of communication which responded to the survey in the (1) requiring of core courses, (2) requiring of specifically designated core courses, and (3) in the requiring of core courses which are inclusive of a totality of the ocmmunication/mass communication discipline. Continuing research will explore in more depth the specific commonalities in not just programs but rather courses and majors.

INSTITUTIONS WHICH RESPONDED TO QUESTIONNAIRE

Based upon the program listing in the 1985 Journalism Directory, published by the Association for Education in Journalsim and Mass Communication, 40 institutions were contacted by direct mail and asked to respond to the survey instrument. Of course, 31 responded--83.7 percent. Those institutions are listed below.

Arizona State University

Arkansas State University

California State University-Chico

California State University-Fullerton

Cornell University

Drake University

Glassboro State University

Iowa State University

Loyola University-New Orleans

Michigan State University

Middle Tennessee State University

Oklahoma State University

Pepperdine University

Purdue University

Temple University

Texas Tech University

University of Alabama

University of Alaska-Anchorage

University of Houston

University of Michigan

University of Nevada - Las Vegas

University of Oklahoma

University of the Pacific

University of South Alabama

University of Texas - Austin

University of Toledo

University of Utah

University of Washington

Utah State University

Virginia Polytechnic University

Washington State University

NOTES

1. John DeMott, "Journalism Education Courses an Essential Part of Liberal Education," Journalism Education, Vol. 33 No. 3 (Autumn 1984), pp. 31-32.

2. Planning for Curricular Change, A Report of the Project on the Future of Journalism and Mass Communication Education, School of Journalism, University of Oregon, Eugene, Ore., May 1984.

3. "Colleges Urged to Focus on Substances of Academic Experience Not Money," The Chronicle of Higher Education, March 27, 1985, p. 1.

4. Robert J. Graig, "J-Educators Must Deal with "A Nation at Risk," Journalism Educator, Vol. 40., No 2 (Summer 1985) p. 43.

5. Ibid.

6. "Journalism and Mass Communication Education for the 21st Century, Journalism Educator, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Autumn 1985).

7. Ibid.

8. Achal Mehra, "LiberaL Arts Help to Develop Critical Judgment," Journalism Educator, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Autumn 1984), p. 36.

9. Robert O. Blanchard and William G. Christ, In Search of the Unit Core: A Look into Commonalities in JMC Curricula. Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, Spring 1985.

10. Richard W. Budd, "It's Time to Set New Directions in Communication Education," Journalism Educator, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Autumn 1985), p. 24.

11. Ibid,. p. 26.

12. Churchill L. Roberts, "Speech, Mass Comm Faculty Strengthen Journalism Unit," Journalism Educator, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Summer 1984), p. 42.